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## THE PROBLEM OF WASTE IN THE COLLEGE LECTURE<sup>1</sup>

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A distinguished Harvard man, your friend and neighbor, Colonel Higginson, once said in a valuable little book, *Hints on Writing and Speech Making*, that one should never carry a scrap of paper before his audience. Another distinguished Harvard alumnus, who was the most effective speaker for many years in the General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church, when he was speaking under a ten-minute rule, and at the close the bell sounded, and everyone said, "Go on, go on," declined so to do, making the statement that a man who could not say all that was really necessary in ten minutes had no right to speak one. Now between those two bits of Harvard advice I am somewhat confused. I think, however, that I will take the second, if I may; and for the purpose of keeping as near ten minutes as possible I will presently bring a few scraps of paper before my audience. I am very glad, let me say, that Dr. Huntington's suggestion was not carried out by my predecessors; but evidently it belongs to me, speaking rather late in the afternoon of a rich day.

Now, sir, notwithstanding your too kind introduction, it might seem, and to me it does seem, absolutely fatuous to try to say anything new concerning lectures, here where so many have been delivered, and where at this moment I am sitting between lecturers of far greater competence than my own.

Didactic instruction is as old as humanity. When the first human said anything in the way of information to another, he delivered a lecture; and the last human remark, before everything caves in, will, I suppose, be a lecture. There were lectures in Palestine which influence us today, or will tomorrow, at any rate. Greek instruction was in the form of didactic lectures.

<sup>1</sup> Read at the meeting of the Harvard Teachers' Association, Cambridge, Massachusetts, March 15, 1913.

The lecture came all the way down through the mediaeval university. The word "lecture" is the regular expression for instruction in the English universities and in some American institutions, peculiarly those in the South, which have followed, or striven to follow, English lines. I remember a book published in England which put the word "recitations" in quotation marks, as indicating our method of instruction here—a method which was actually so unfamiliar on the other side that it needed to be characterized by inverted commas. We have had, for seventy or a hundred years, professional-school lectures. I have my father's notebooks of lectures in the Harvard Medical School as far back as the forties. Later, as you all know, and I don't need to dwell further upon this fact, we have had most successfully—and nowhere, I take it, more successfully than right here—the university lecture to graduates, and in somewhat less degree the undergraduate lecture to those of greater youth.

My sole topic, however, is the college lecture, and not the college lecture in general, but the limitations and failures which are connected therewith—the outs rather than the ins. And here, finally, I have no personal right to speak, but the circumstances of my twenty-nine years at Dartmouth have given me, perhaps, a rather vague fitness to speak a word for those circumstances.

Let me say, very briefly, that I began in a small, poor, ill-equipped, and isolated college, and I left two years ago a large, still not rich, reasonably well-equipped, and of course more or less isolated college. At first, with an imperfection which I know very well, I did all the teaching in the English department, and left undone a great deal more than I did. At my departure there were a dozen competent instructors to take up the work which I had imperfectly tried to perform for nearly three decades. The circumstances of the case, therefore, rather than any competence on my part as an observer, enable me to see the progress which may be made, or the retrogression which may appear, in a college which is passing from an almost strictly recitation system to a partially developed lecture system.

And let me also say, once for all at the start, that I heartily

believe in the lecture as a means of undergraduate instruction. I have got, with imperfect powers, better results from it than from textbook work; and am fully convinced that every college teacher should be able and willing to assume the pleasures and responsibilities of this mode of instruction, asking only for the opportunity to get at a great roomful of students for a series of hours. The ideal, the counsel of perfection, is the untrammelled lecture, guarded only by an examination at the end of the course. So much for the positive, for the optimistic, side.

Now let me turn for my remaining few minutes to the negative and somewhat gloomier, possibly superficially pessimistic, side. For, as I said, I am to discuss the outs rather than the ins of the case, and try to consider a few remedies for unquestionable evils encountered in certain kinds of courses or by certain kinds of instructors.

We all know that the "college man," as he calls himself, is at first a schoolboy, unfamiliar with lectures, on the one hand, or tutors, on the other. You recall the almost classic remark of Dean Briggs to the effect that a collegian claims to be a man, acts like a boy, and then reminds his somewhat confused instructors and guardians that they have forgotten that he is only a boy after all. The college man or the college boy, again, is often lazier than he was before or ever will be again—lazier, I take it, than under the German or the English tutorial system. He does not seem to grasp the ideal which is in the lecturer's mind. That ideal might be described in the words of a definition of the declaration of absolution once given by a High-Church Episcopalian. The definition ran as follows: "The declaration of absolution is an authoritative act of the church, sown broadcast to take root where it will." Well, I wish that answered rather better for the college lecture. But to continue the ecclesiastical figure: when the seed is sown broadcast the college lecturer too often goes on to think of weeds and brambles and stony ground and fowls of the air and other things which interfere in truly biblical fashion with the desired fruition. The facts of the case as regards the falling of the lecture upon the undergraduate mind are too often more accurately described in the words of a clever parody of Walt Whitman, which

the brilliant Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch wrote for the *Oxford Magazine* when he was an Oxford undergraduate. The first lines of that parody ran as follows, and they may well be put into the mouth or into the mind of many an American undergraduate:

Behold, I am not one that goes to Lectures or the pow-wow of Professors.  
The elementary laws never apologize; neither do I apologize.  
I find letters from the Dean dropped on my table, and every one is signed by  
the Dean's name,  
And I leave them where they are, for I know that as long as I stay up  
Others will come forever and ever.  
I am one who goes to the river.

So that we encounter the student who does not care for our lectures or the pow-wow of professors, but prefers very much to go to the river, or what corresponds to the river in the inland colleges. That is to say, the modern average student—one of the perils of prosperity in a college—wants things, he says, in black and white, if he really wants anything at all. “If the lecture,” he says in substance, “is poorer than the textbook, don’t give it; if better, why don’t you print it?” To which the poor lecturer somewhat feebly replies, “If the textbook is all, have at your bed’s head twenty books clad in black and red, and don’t go to college or university at all.”

But as regards our subject, the very first element of waste that occurs to me is from the undergraduate’s inability to take notes. That very interesting story which President Eliot told this morning of the lack of perception on the part of certain Boston clubmen reminded me of the old “Eyes and No-eyes” story, which we might expand into ears and no-ears, of the very first book I ever owned, the *Evenings at Home* by Mrs. Barbauld and Dr. Aikin. We think we see; we pretend to hear; but when we start to jot down things in notebook form we don’t always succeed as well as the speaker desired. If everybody had taken notes of the wisdom which we have heard today, prior to the unfortunate time when I arose, I am not perfectly sure that all that the speakers said would have been permanently preserved exactly as they would have wished.

The schoolboy who goes from the “prep school,” as he calls

it, to the college or university has sometimes a startling inability to take notes, and an equally depressing inability to appreciate the points which the lecturer tries to make. He determines to work the thing up later; or he says, "I believe I will run my chances." The worst of it is that the "soft snap" becomes softer still as we approach the realm in which the instructor most earnestly, but not always successfully, seeks to develop appreciation. To another body of teachers the other day I was quoting Professor Trent's remark on teaching the spirit of literature, in which he said, with a great deal of truth: "One should merely get a primer of English literature and then add to it sympathetic readings." That fits the undergraduates. But sympathy, when the instructor tries to elicit it, is sometimes received by the student, when you ask him what he has really got, with a courtesy which is not always a precedent condition of subsequent results.

Hence there is a certain misfit between the lecturer and the undergraduate writer of an examination paper; because we must have some tests, I suppose we all would admit. For instance, in overhauling the gems on both sides which I collected for twenty-nine years, I have found the following. And let me frankly say that sometimes the instructor is gratified by an unquestionably original remark, or written observation, by a student, which is actually as good as a Sainte-Beuve or a Matthew Arnold or a Lowell might have written. It generally doesn't go beyond a line or two, but sometimes you get it. On the other side, our cheer is dampened by such experiences as these. In those poor old days, when I was trying to do everything and leaving more things undone, I once had a course in Middle English, in which certain parts of Wycliffe's Bible constituted the textbook, and I gave a lecture on the Bible considered as literature—rather a large subject for a single lecture—in which I reminded my students that we were to consider that incomparable body of writings as a library, not merely a book; and that in all reverence, whatever our views of inspiration, whether Roman Catholic or Protestant, whether conservative or liberal, we should remember to read those books perfectly frankly and fairly, not trying to read Exodus as we should read Isaiah, or Leviticus as we should read James. In point of fact—

I said with such earnestness as I could command—there would be no irreverence in declaring that the Book of Esther was, as it were, an idyllic novelette; Numbers, a census report or book of statistics; Leviticus, a law book; the Psalms, a sort of Hebrew *Golden Treasury*, and Isaiah or Revelation, a great poetic foretelling. Well, a man of great football prowess listened to me and informed me, when he came to the examination replies which were supposed to cover that lecture, that the Bible was “a book of foretelling dreams, an idolic novelist, and a book of statics.” A certain element of waste was exhibited there.

I once gave a lecture, which I won't summarize even as briefly as I did that on the Bible considered as literature, on Bunyan and his great work; and a student derived from it the information that Bunyan's great work was successfully to set forth, in remarkable literary form, “the terrible doctrines of damnation and salvation.” I spoke of a certain delicacy in the nature and in the poetic work of the author of the “Elegy in a Country Churchyard,” and was told at the end—all things come round to him who will but wait—that “considered as a man Gray was an old woman.” Continuing to learn with reference to the literature of the eighteenth century, it was a matter of instructive information that “Tom Jones was the first novelist” of that century. And occasionally, in this same wastefulness, your sapient undergraduate will make a grand combination such as that in the mention of Poe's “The Rape of the Lock” and “The Fall of the House of Russia.”

Are these arraignments of the lecture system only? Not at all, because in justice we should remember that almost as deep stupidities emerge from the recitation system. I have been quoting these from memory in preparing this little talk. A man after a recitation exercise, based, in the ancient years, on Taine, when I thought he got the idea, said, “The Anglo-Saxons were a brutal, pious, philosophical people,” which seems to me to be a pretty good summary, after all, of Taine's celebrated chapter on the Anglo-Saxons.

Another bit of inaccuracy, after a course in which a very large textbook of my own was employed, was the mention of Whittier's fine poem “The Old Open Bucket.” In the same course, sixty

printed pages by myself, in the student's hands, left the impression in his mind that Hawthorne, "although not strictly to be called morbid, was not an exceedingly jocular poet." And my chapter in my *American Literature* on Longfellow, expounded for a week, led another youth to say—we had been speaking of the meter of "Evangeline" and the meter of "Hiawatha"—that "Longfellow was the first writer successfully to use metrical verse."

Well, now, you see we have been turning from the lecture system to the textbook system, and we find an element of waste there. And if we were to turn to the sacrosanct preceptorial system I think we should find an element of waste even there. A very industrious and praiseworthy successful preceptor in my last year at Dartmouth, after a week devoted to his favorite subject, the Book of Job, in the incomparable King James Version, got the information from a student that the subject of that book was the flood and Noah the central character—a more learned reply than that which another successful and hard-working preceptor got when a student told him that Lot's wife was one of the figures described in the prologue to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

Dartmouth College happens to be the one of which I know most. I would not for a moment, by these selections, which reach over a pretty long period, leave the impression that the Dartmouth undergraduate is peculiar in the sort of wisdom which he displays before his instructors. Professor Hill of Harvard once said to me that after reading a lot of themes on the play *As You Like It*, I think it was, his mind got so confused that he had to take Shakespeare from the shelf and read the play through to find what in the world it was all about. There may have been at Harvard, as there have been at Dartmouth; there may have been at Yale; there may have been at other colleges, youths whose mentality is not as yet in a condition which can be called perfect.

Some illustrations of the element of waste in the college lecture I have thus informally been bringing before you. There is waste everywhere, and the whole purpose, I suppose, of today's discussion is to try to discover the causes of the waste, and having found the root of the evil, as Chaucer says, to administer the proper educational remedy, partly to ourselves and partly to those for whom or with whom we work.



But it seems to me that in any college the element of waste in the lecture is greatly increased by using it as an economical make-shift. Harvard College, shortly before President Eliot's illustrious administration, had about four hundred undergraduates. Dartmouth today has twelve or fourteen hundred. And other colleges have grown correspondingly. There is a very strong temptation, when the college grows numerically from 400 to 1,000 and from 1,000 to 2,000 or 3,000 in the undergraduate department, to make the lecturer out of the former teacher in little divisions of twenty or twenty-five—and there I speak feelingly. It is a dangerous and very undesirable method. If you believe in the lecture system get your lecturer and let him do the best he can with it. If you do not believe in the lecture system, don't be forced into such a makeshift as that of turning a man who would be a pretty good classroom instructor, on old-fashioned methods, to talking to two, three, four, or five hundred students, thus setting forth a system in which neither he nor the college would have believed had it had more money.

Now what are the remedies for this problem of waste? Here again I speak very modestly, because the problem of the college lecture is not that of the university, and not that of the preparatory school. It would seem to me, on the basis of my own experience, which is all I am undertaking to set before you, that the first remedy is to catch your lecturer if you can. If he be really in love with his subject and determined that it shall be taught to others, he will be like a torch around which many other little torches will gather in order that they may catch his light.

It seems to me also wise not to begin the lecture too soon in elementary courses.

My third point would be to combine it, especially in such subjects as history or physics, with assigned collateral readings or even a textbook. There is very little difference between the boy or girl in the last years of the high school or academy and the boy or girl in the first year of a collegiate course. The lecture in the high school or academy is an exception. The lecture as the sole or the chief means of instruction in the college or the university is therefore to many a foreign and unassimilatable thing.

Fourth—and I really think there is a great deal of importance in this little fourth suggestion—put a syllabus on the board. As I said at the start, I think a lecturer ought to be willing to assume the responsibility of making his subject interesting, even without these checks and balances which I am now setting before you. But I think most important of all, more important than everything else together, is a list of ten or fifteen topics which you follow extemporaneously in your remarks, and which the student, whether or not he goes any farther in his notetaking, copies on the blank page before him.

Fifth, in certain cases, don't leave the lecture too long undefended by quizzes—not always, but in certain cases. And I must say that when the lecture courses were about half as numerically portentous as they were in my last three years at Dartmouth, I tried two experiments, both of which were absolute failures. One was, in a course on English literature, to require the reading of Brooke's *Primer*, I then asking ten or twenty questions in the last ten minutes of the hour. That was a complete and a deserved failure. Equally unsuccessful, in a lecture course of one hundred, was the attempt to call on eight or ten different men at the end of the lecture to summarize the points which they had heard just before. Neither of those plans worked.

Sixth, let your helpers be men familiar with your own methods. That is absolutely indispensable.

Seventh, though the examination be the final desirability, sometimes guard it by arbitrary rules of attendance. I think there is no real inconsistency in this, as we have to consider the average man. I am reluctant to give this hint, but I fear that sometimes it is necessary. It seems to me as though the marking system for attendance ought to be utterly inconsistent with the lecture system, but sometimes it is necessary.

Then there is a final matter which time does not allow me, or competency permit me, to discuss at length. I will merely allude to it—namely, the preceptorial system. As I take it—and I shall be corrected if in error—the first suggestion of the preceptorial system was made by President Hyde of Bowdoin. It can be worked well and has worked well in a small college like that. The

merits of the system at Princeton are enthusiastically described by most of the preceptors and by some of the students, but there is a very serious couple of objections to it. If your diligent student likes the program of give and take, with six or eight others, for days and weeks and months in a little room, your idle student does not; and I am told by Princeton preceptors that it has been found better to have the brighter students together and the duller students together. But that is too large a subject for me to enlarge upon.

There is, however, an economic disadvantage in the system which might not be apparent at Harvard, but certainly would in a college like Dartmouth—namely, that your preceptor is ranked, on election, as of the grade of assistant professor. He either is or is not promoted. He being an effective remedy, in many ways, for the evils of the lecture system which I have described, if he is promoted, the small institution is bankrupt; if he is not, you have a body of somewhat unhappy and dissatisfied middle-aged gentlemen. I once heard the then President Wilson of Princeton—now President of the United States—deliver a delightful lecture at the installation of President Richmond of Union, on the “Art of Being a College President.” And he said, “To be a successful college president one must be a fighter. He must have a policy and must carry it right through, for,” said he, “college professors are more sensitive, if possible, than members of church choirs.” “Some of them,” he went on to say—as I recall at this distance of time—“are to be convinced, some to be cajoled, some to be conquered, and some to be ignored.” The sensitiveness of the college instructor naturally becomes rather great, to return to my point, if he finds himself at forty or forty-five or fifty an assistant professor, with no chance of promotion except by way of transfer to another college. I am perfectly justified in bringing in that criticism of what would otherwise be rather a capital remedy for the element of waste of which I have been trying to speak.

Finally, I have, though not as badly as I feared, exceeded my ten minutes. Success or failure, under any system, as has been said by speaker after speaker today, depends, of course, mainly on the personal impact of the man.